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Kevin N. Moll

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Musica Ficta

Realizing Partial Signatures around 1400: Liebert's Credo as a Test Case

Kevin N. Moll

A number of scholars have addressed the problem of the so-called partial signatures in vocal polyphony around 1400 and the perplexing adjustments of accidentals they inevitably require.¹ Various interpretations have been proposed to account for them, but none is both comprehensive enough and sufficiently in line with contemporary theory to achieve a satisfactory modern realization. Apel, Hoppin, and Reaney suggested that contrasting signatures reflect differing modes for the respective voice parts.² Lowinsky chal-

¹ The most typical case of partial signatures is where the discantus has no signature, while the tenor and contratenor each have a B^b signature.

² Willi Apel, "The Partial Signatures in the Sources up to 1450," *Acta musicologica* 10 (1938), 1-13, 11 (1939), 40-42; Richard Hoppin, "Partial Signatures and *Musica ficta* in Some Early 15th-Century Sources," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 6 (1953), 197-215; Gilbert Reaney, "*Musica ficta* in the Works of Guillaume de Machaut," *Les colloques de Wégimont* 2 (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les belles lettres," 1959). The basic tenets of these theories were retained by Edward L. Kottick in "Flats, Modality, and *Musica ficta* in Some Early Renaissance Chansons," *Journal of Music Theory* 11 (1968), 264-80.

lenged this, proposing instead that the signatures arise from the predominant cadential scale degrees.³ Hughes and Bent expanded on Lowinsky's thesis, advocating that the partial signatures "enhance the possibilities for phrygian cadences, thus reducing the need for *ficta* sharps in the upper voice(s)."⁴ Karol Berger, on the other hand, showed the contemporary theorists' accounts of partial signatures to lie not in the facilitation of cadential motion, but in the avoidance of vertical tritones.⁵ Dahlhaus considered the phenomenon as reflecting an "octatonic system" wherein both B and B^b belong to the realm of *musica vera*, as confirmed by the existence of the hard and soft hexachords.⁶ Lastly, Christian Berger asserted that the lack of a signature in the upper voice is illusory, and that this part should be realized as though the signature were present.⁷

These varying explanations leave the modern performer in something of a quandary: how is one to reconcile the differing opinions and establish a consistent approach? The problem is placed into relief when encountering an actual 15th century work (such as Liebert's Credo, dealt with below), wherein a number of problems arise for which none of the above theories provides a complete answer. Consequently I have developed a system of realization in which the discantus adheres to melodic principles outlined by Marchettus of Padua in the tenth treatise of *Lucidarium* (c. 1318):

It is evident that if high c occurs before low F, the melody should be sung with square b . . . [or] if F occurs first, it should be sung

³ Edward Lowinsky, "The Function of Conflicting Signatures in Early Polyphonic Music," *Musical Quarterly* 31 (1945), 227-60.

⁴ Quote from Andrew Hughes, *Manuscript Accidentals: Ficta in Focus* (American Institute of Musicology, 1972), 51-52. See also Margaret Bent, "*Musica recta* and *musica ficta*," *Musica disciplina* 26 (1972), 73-100.

⁵ Karol Berger, *Musica ficta* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 66.

⁶ Carl Dahlhaus, "Bitonalität oder Oktatonik? Divergierende Vorzeichen in den Chansons von Binchois," *Festschrift Wolfgang Rehm zum 60s Geburtstag*, eds. Dietrich Berke and Harald Heckmann (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1989), 15-21.

⁷ Christian Berger, "Hexachord und Modus: drei Rondeaux von Gilles Binchois," *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis* 17 (1993), 71-87.

with round b.⁸

This rule provides a key to the problem of rendering the unsignatured parts in works with partial signatures, since it gives a basis for systematizing the choice of B-natural and B-flat according to clear melodic criteria. However, as the music employing partial signatures is by definition polyphonic, it is not sufficient merely to apply the rule without taking into consideration several other aspects as well.

My approach, then, is laid out in the following three stages. These may indeed be followed literally when rehearsing with an early music performing group.

- 1) Consider the relationship between the structural voices (discantus and tenor). Identify the interior cadences and when necessary inflect the discantus accordingly so as to reach perfect intervals from the closest imperfect consonances. Then fix any remaining intervals that are perceived as problematic, while preserving any accidentals appearing in the source, along with the integrity of the tenor signature inasmuch as this is possible.
- 2) Consider the contratenor in relation to the two other parts and inflect the cadences accordingly. Then fix any remaining problematic intervals, while preserving accidentals appearing in the source and the integrity of the contratenor signature as much as possible.
- 3) Inflect the discantus line according to the melodic principles outlined by Marchettus, using B-naturals in ascending lines and B-flats in descending lines according to the nodal contours around C and F; do this whenever it does not conflict with cadences already established or with the sonority of the lower voices.

Following the above principles of realization I take as an example the opening (mm. 1-18) of the Credo from the Mass by Reginaldus Liebert.⁹

⁸ *The Lucidarium of Marchetto of Padua*, ed. and trans. Jan W. Herlinger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 401 (Latin text, 400).

⁹ My edition; recorded by *Schola Discantus, Lyrichord Early Music Series*, LEMS 8025.

Pa - trem om - ni - po - ten - tem,

This system contains measures 1 through 5. The vocal line (treble clef) begins with a key signature change from one flat to two flats (B-flat to A-flat) at measure 2, indicated by a sharp sign above the staff. The bass line (bass clef) starts with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). Measure 5 ends with a fermata over the final note.

fac to - rem cae - li et ter - rae, vi - si - bi - li - um

This system contains measures 6 through 10. The vocal line (treble clef) has a key signature change to one flat (B-flat) at measure 7, indicated by a flat sign below the staff. Measure 10 ends with a fermata over the final note.

om - ni - um et in - vi - si - bi - li - um.

This system contains measures 11 through 15. The vocal line (treble clef) has a key signature change to two flats (B-flat and A-flat) at measure 12, indicated by a sharp sign above the staff. The bass line (bass clef) has a key signature change to one flat (B-flat) at measure 12, indicated by a sharp sign below the staff. Measure 15 ends with a fermata over the final note.

The accidentals applied here editorially can be broken down into three groups:

- 1) inflections conditioned by the presence of an impending contrapuntal cadence;
- 2) inflections applied to forestall augmented or diminished perfect intervals in voices sounding simultaneously and, if desired, to ameliorate such intervals occurring melodically in any individual voice part;
- 3) inflections applied to the upper voice in accordance with Marchettus's rule. In the present example this includes a B^b that moves down to F (mm. 3-4), a B that moves up to C (mm. 7-10), and three B^bs, each of which move downwards to F (mm. 13-16).

Considering the example in respect to individual measures, the following editorial adjustments are required:

- m. 1 Sharps inflect the discantus and contra, forming a double leading-tone progression with the tenor. The B in the contra is added to avoid a melodic augmented 2nd and a vertical augmented 5th. Contrapuntally, this passage has all the earmarks of a cadence; the inflections serve to add emphasis to the last half of the word *Patrem*.
- m. 3 B^b in the discantus is applied on the basis of melodic contour (Marchettus's rule).
- m. 4 Major-6th to 8ve motion between discantus and tenor emphasizes the cadence at the end of the phrase. The Bs in the tenor are inserted to avoid an augmented-5th interval with the F# in the discantus. It would also be possible to retain the B^bs in the tenor (resulting in a brief augmented 6th interval with the discantus) if it were deemed paramount to maintain a consistent 8ve species in that voice, in which case it would be necessary to change the contra's first note to E^b to avoid a diminished 5th between the lower voices.
- m. 7-9 B in the discantus is retained on the basis of melodic contour (Marchettus's rule).
- m. 11 B^b in the discantus is applied on account of the tenor B^b (this

overrides Marchettus's rule).

mm. 13-16 B^bs in the discantus are applied on the basis of melodic contour (Marchettus's rule).

m. 17 F# inflects the discantus into a major-6th to 8ve progression with the tenor (necessary phrase-ending cadence). Note that in the source an F# is written into the contra part to forestall a potential augmented 8ve.

m. 18 B in the contra is applied to avoid a diminished-4th leap.

Of the positions enumerated at the outset, Lowinsky's, Karol Berger's, and Dahlhaus's are not incompatible with the process just illustrated—although neither are any of them strictly identifiable with it. On the other hand, the hypotheses of Apel, Hoppin, and Reaney, of Hughes and Bent, and of Christian Berger seem, for different reasons, to be less plausible or less workable than the one suggested here.¹⁰

My method treats the pitch set of the discantus as being the most amenable of melodic inflection, whereas the tenor is, in general, treated as the most inviolable of the three voice parts (the contra falls somewhere in between). The resulting constant vacillation in the discantus between B and B^b, along with the many necessary cadential F#s (and other accidentals required at cadences on various scale degrees), intensifies the coloristic effect, thus conforming to the "more subtle" (*subtilior*) aesthetic that is demonstrably evident in other musical characteristics of this time, notably rhythm.¹¹

While some of my decisions may be open to reinterpretation, the point of significance is that it is possible to realize partial signatures in a systematic manner, albeit allowing for a certain latitude in the governing criteria under which one chooses to operate. Historically,

¹⁰ Of all these theories only that of Hughes and Bent is oriented toward practical considerations of performance. I plan to expand upon the above points in a future study.

¹¹ Alternatively, it would be possible to treat the discantus as being the most inviolable voice part and the lower voice signatures as being the more flexible, but such a procedure proves to entail serious potential consequences for large scale tonal coherence.

the procedure is justifiable in that it is consistent with the dyadic principles of cantilena-style counterpoint as discussed by any number of contemporary music theorists, in which the discantus-tenor interval is conceptually primary, and the contra is added according to the consonance between the structural voices—a technique I have elsewhere referred to as “expanded two-voice counterpoint.”¹²

Finally, the sequential procedure I am advocating here could easily have been achieved in rehearsal by period singers reading from isolated parts. The results are arguably convincing, both historically and musically, for the three-voice repertoire of the period encompassing several decades before and after 1400. On the other hand, my recent experiences with Dufay’s *Missa L’Homme Armé* have demonstrated that four-voice works manifesting partial signatures do not necessarily submit as readily to this approach.

¹² See my discussion of this principle in “Structural Determinants in Polyphony for the Mass Ordinary from French and Related Sources (ca. 1320-1410)” (Ph. D. diss., Stanford University, 1994), 194-202.